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Aunt Hattie's Place struggles with prospect of closure *by Sylvia Carignan Staff writer*

At Aunt Hattie's Place, a group home in Sandy Spring, the beds are empty. There are no more sneakers tucked under beds or clothes folded into drawers. The house, which once housed eight disadvantaged boys, is empty; with no money, [the child care program](#) has been suspended.

After the state's Department of Human Resources denied the group home a renewal of its contract, the program lost the majority of its funding. Aunt Hattie's Place receives donations from churches and local organizations, but the funds are not enough to fill the hole the state contract leaves behind.

Social workers from the county moved the eight boys out, but Aunt Hattie's Place Executive Director Hattie Washington refuses to give in to closure when the child care program still has a chance of revival.

According to Maryland Department of Human Resources spokesman Brian Schleter, "the evaluation committee ranked the Sandy Spring location for Aunt Hattie's Place in last place in their category and did not recommend them for an award," or contract.

Washington and Emily Vaias, a Linowes and Blocher lawyer working pro bono for Aunt Hattie's Place, filed an appeal to try to persuade the state to reverse its decision and renew the Sandy Spring group home's contract. Vaias said the organization is waiting for a hearing to be set with the state Board of Appeals, where it can make its case.

Money for Aunt Hattie's Place's Sandy Spring home, from the previous state contract, will run out by the end of June.

"We need a million-dollar donor," Washington said.

Without support, Vaias said, the organization can't pay the mortgage for the group home this month. Washington's house, built adjacent to the group home on the same Sandy Spring lot, was put up as collateral when the group home was constructed. If Washington loses the group home, she'll lose her own home with it.

"I'm trying not to think about that," she said.

The Sandy Spring home is one of three that operate under the Aunt Hattie's Place name; there is a second house in Randallstown in Baltimore County, and a third house in the city of Baltimore.

Jamal Gardner, 22, lived in the Randallstown and Baltimore homes for several years. He had lived in four different foster homes and 10 group homes since the age of 5.

"I was in group homes, group homes, and group homes, and nothing worked," Gardner said.

He ran away from some of the group homes, and got expelled in middle school, he said. After going to a school in Virginia for students with behavioral problems, he was back in public school by 10th grade.

With help from Washington, financial aid and a scholarship, he's now enrolled at Coppin State University,

Gardner lived in the school's dorms during his first year, but now that he's out for the summer, he has nowhere to call home. Washington invited him to live at her Sandy Spring home for the summer, and he accepted. But if Washington is unable to continue her child care program, he'll be faced with homelessness.

"We just need somebody to know we're here, we're needed," Washington said.

Vaias said the organization is hoping Sandy Spring Bank will show some leniency when it comes to paying the mortgage for the group home.

"We no longer have any money to pay the mortgage," Vaias said.

Washington started building the home on the Sandy Spring site in 2004, and opened it in 2010. Aunt Hattie's Place has a 10-year covenant with the county: if the county agreed to help fund the home's construction, Washington would agree to keep it open for the next ten years.

When the home was constructed, the state and the county contributed \$1.4 million, according to Vaias. Washington took out a loan from Sandy Spring Bank for \$1.8 million, and has been working to pay it back since 2010.

Local officials — some of whom were present at the home's ribbon-cutting ceremony three years ago — have written to the Department of Human Resources to argue against the state's decision.

Sen. Karen S. Montgomery (D-Dist. 14) of Brookeville wrote in her letter to the department, dated June 5, that she was "outraged" that the home had been denied funding.

"Where are [the boys] to go?" she wrote. "Why a foster home when they have a home!"

The eight boys who were moved out of the Sandy Spring home were moved to other group homes or back with family members, Washington said.

"Some went home with biological relatives — the same relative that had abused them the last time," she said.

In Montgomery's letter, she noted that the locations where children are placed do not always fit their needs.

"If good group homes, like [Aunt Hattie's Place], are destroyed now, and there is future recognition that these homes were in fact more successful than forced private home placements, the children will be the ones who suffer," she wrote.

The home's staff had their hours cut "drastically," Washington said. "We redeployed them to the Baltimore house, but we tried not to lay off anybody."

So far, the home's staff members have kept their jobs, but Washington said she's not sure how long that will last with their limited funds. The program is taking donations at aunthattie.org.

Though Montgomery County has been unable to provide financial support to the home since the contract was denied renewal, several members of the council have expressed their concern about the Sandy Spring home's fate.

Council President Nancy Navarro and Councilman George Leventhal have thrown their support behind the program in public letters to the Department of Human Resources.

The boys at Aunt Hattie's Place feel "loved and supported" there, Montgomery said in her letter. "This is their home. Do not take this away from them."

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